

Roy Albert Crowson D.Sc., A.R.C.S., D.I.C.

Roy Crowson, who died on May 13, 1999, aged 84, was one of the most distinguished systematic coleopterists of his generation, his interest being fired by gifts of a book on beetles and a copy of Darwin's *Origin of Species* during his childhood. His enthusiasm was maintained to the end though he admitted that if he had not chosen beetles he would have selected some other group for study.

A native of Kent, he retained his regional accent throughout his life and, after graduating from the Imperial College of Science and Technology in London he was appointed assistant curator at the Tunbridge Wells Museum. He served in the RAF during the 1939-45 war and came to Scotland in 1948 to take up a lectureship in Taxonomy at the Zoology Department at Glasgow University. Subsequently he was promoted to Senior Lecturer and, after reaching retiring age, stayed on as an Honorary Lecturer and Research Fellow until his final illness struck.

In 1954 he married Betty Campbell, a Glasgow graduate with a keen interest in spiders, and she remained a stalwart companion throughout his life looking after him and collaborating and contributing to his work both at home and abroad.

His published works, totalling over 200, covered many aspects of his subject. Early in his career (1950-54) he produced a series of papers in the *Entomologist's Monthly Magazine* detailing an evolutionary system of classifying the families of British Coleoptera. A revised version of this with the title, *The Natural Classification of the Families of Coleoptera*, was published in 1955 and this was reprinted with additions and corrections in 1967. The arrangement of the major groups in this latter work was largely followed in the most recent check-list of British Coleoptera (1977). A review entitled *The phylogeny of Coleoptera* appears in the *Annual Review of Entomology* in 1960 and a paper entitled *The evolutionary history of Coleoptera, as documented by fossil and comparative evidence* appeared in 1975. His magnum opus the monumental book, *The Biology of Coleoptera*, was published in 1981.

Roy was an ardent Darwinist and had a rare, computer-like capacity to see his subject as an integrated whole rather than as a series of parts. This ability was by no means confined to beetles: he could also discuss subjects as remote as the origin of fishes and the evolution of their swim bladder with authority. I suspect he was not much interested in species taxonomy, though he contributed to numerous faunal surveys, but seemed more interested in the inter-relationships of groups and their adaptive radiations. One of his main natural history interests was the recognition of key species of beetles as indicators of ancient woodlands and he collaborated with other

Glasgow Natural History Society members, the Nature Conservancy Council and the Scottish Wildlife Trust in studies of these.

His erudition was overwhelming and, with an exceptional memory for detail, he could be a formidable opponent in argument. With little interest in small talk and none in gossip he rarely relaxed. The only memory of my 23rd birthday tea in 1948, was his telling me that the genus *Rhododendron* had more than 500 species! Like many distinguished scholars, he did not suffer fools gladly and eschewed pretentiousness or humbug. At times he could become emotionally involved in the defence of his views and a well-intentioned, but misjudged lecture held recently in his honour, purporting to be about "Fields and Trees" but really dealing with computer-generated dendrograms, was received with less than enthusiasm.

At the Zoology Department Roy made countless preparations for anatomical investigation and in his room a bunsen burner flamed continually, like a ritual candle, in readiness to macerate dissected beetle parts in hot caustic. From these he built up an extensive and valuable collection of carefully prepared microscope slides. He also left extensive spirit collections of beetle larvae and, as one of the curators of the Zoology collection of the Hunterian Museum he looked after and extended the collections of pinned insects. He recorded his findings immediately, touch typing with furious abandon.

In the field he worked relentlessly and with great energy and this vigour was apparent elsewhere. He talked rapidly, walked more quickly than most people and until he was well into his sixties travelled to work on a small-wheeled bicycle.

It would be a mistake, however, to think that Roy's life was entirely dominated by beetles and Zoology. He read widely, could quote much poetry from memory and could hold his own in philosophical argument. He was a passionate lover of classical music, in particular that of Mozart, whose works he knew by their Köchel numbers, and of Handel, Elgar and Bruckner. He was also an accomplished, self-taught pianist. He was an excellent linguist being fluent in French, German and Russian and did much to draw attention to the works of Russian entomologists.

In 1980 Roy was awarded the gold medal of the Linnean Society in recognition of his unique contribution to Entomology, and in 1994 a two-volume *Festschrift*, or celebratory collection of papers entitled *Biology, Phylogeny and Classification of Coleoptera* was published in Warsaw to commemorate his 80th birthday. It is regrettable that the University which he served so long and so well did little to acknowledge his contribution – a personal professorship was the least that might have been expected.

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